

MBTA Communities Working Group

May 16, 2023

Meeting Summary

Attending: Mette Aamodt, Vince Baudoin, Rebecca Gruber, Kin Lau, Stephen Revilak, Laura Wiener

Staff: Claire Ricker

From project consultant Utile: Will Cohen, Matthew Littell, Rahi Patel, Zoe Mueller

Introduction to Utile, project consultant

The working group is introduced to Utile, our project consultants. They're working with a number of communities on designing Section 3A-compliant multi-family districts. They'll present draft district maps this evening.

Review and discussion of preliminary draft

Mr. Cohen from Utile leads the discussion. Utile used several of Mass Housing Partnership's compliance-checking tools when developing these maps. What we'll see tonight is a very first pass at something that could work for Arlington, but also something that can be taken and modified. It is not the final version. They assume three dwellings per parcel.

Mr. Cohen explains that one sub-district has to be half the area submitted for compliance. The three districts in the V2 map total more than 32 acres, and satisfy the requirement for having at least fifteen dwelling per gross acre. Arlington's capacity requirement is 2046 dwellings, and the law is silent on who might eventually occupy these dwellings. Section 3A requires that the housing be without restrictions based on age, or the number of children. Communities cannot require ground-floor commercial in their multi-family districts; these state requirements are about housing production. Mr. Cohen's general advice to communities is not to plan for things you don't want to see. For example, communities should not assume that a bonus for ground floor commercial will actually produce ground floor commercial. This is by-right housing, and it's important to focus on the by-right aspects.

Mr. Cohen outlines the survey results that influenced this map, which include:

- 82% of respondents prioritizing vitality of business districts,
- 80% prioritizing shared community spaces,
- 75% prioritizing locations near public transit, and
- 73% prioritizing walkable and bikeable areas.

With these factors in mind, Utile tried to construct districts that would support and supplement our business and industrial districts. Mr. Cohen feels that there are advantages to locating the multi-family districts behind Mass Ave, rather than having them directly on Mass Ave. He also advises us that site-plan review is allowed for developments in these districts, but the process cannot be discretionary.

Ms. Ricker says that Arlington doesn't have a site plan review process. The closest thing is the Environmental Design Review process that the Redevelopment Board uses for special permits. She envisions the ARB taking the role of site plan review.

Mr. Cohen moves on to inclusionary zoning requirements. DHCD's regulations say that a 10% inclusionary requirement is as high as communities can go, without providing a justification and a financial analysis. The state just released additional guidance regarding what is "feasible" and there are technical assistance grants available to communities, to help them assess this.

There's discussion about whether to put the districts right on Mass Ave. Ms. Aamodt thinks that's the most appropriate place. Other working group members prefer having the district set back, to prevent existing commercial properties from turning residential. Ms. Aamodt thinks that an MBTA zone on Mass Ave, if done well, could increase the amount of commercial space in town. This is something we'll have to work out as we go through map iterations.

M. Lau would like to make the district smaller, and allow more dwellings/parcel in places. A six-plex would provide one affordable unit via inclusionary zoning. Mr. Lau says the ARB prefers to keep B districts out of the multi-family zone, and even to pull back from them. He'd like to see us produce housing that allows people to age in place, rather than having to leave town when they downsize. He'd like to see four or more stories, since elevators are required at that height.

Mr. Revilak notes that the Miro board includes a histogram of lot sizes, and the median falls between 5000 and 6000 square feet. He thinks that's a workable size for a three-family dwelling, but could be challenging for larger configurations.

Mr. Baudoin notes that we can require ground floor commercial in some areas, but we wouldn't be able to submit them to DHCD for compliance. He thinks that more people will help to attract businesses, and that avoiding B districts on Mass Ave seems dubious.

Mr. Cohen says, as a very crude rule of thumb, that one unit of housing can support around 30 square feet of retail. Mr. Revilak asks if it would take 100 homes to support a 3000 square foot retail establishment; Mr. Cohen answers in the affirmative.

There's discussion about whether three-family homes should go in single-family districts, rather than areas that already have two-family homes. There's a production advantage in going from one to three, rather than from two to three.

Mr. Baudoin would like to see us set a few dimensional thresholds, like height, but not limit the number of dwellings in a building. He thinks we should let the building size determine that. He thinks that density tends to be a planner's term that doesn't reflect how people experience their neighborhoods. Mr. Baudoin suggests sharpening the narrative, and developing a story of why the map is the way it is.

Mr. Cohen notes that post World War II, the majority of American households lived in single-family homes and had two kids. That's much less the case today -- families are having fewer children, and there are many households with only one or two people. We're also living longer, and the need to age in place is a relatively new thing. He believes that an empty nester living alone in a large single-family home is likely to be interested in options for smaller multi-family units.

Utile asks working group members to provide feedback on the map. They suggest writing comments on the map and photographing them, or marking up the map with a pdf editor.

Next Steps

There's discussion of meeting schedules. Now that town meeting is over, we plan to meet every Tuesday for a few weeks.